

The Unholy Trinity

Revelation 13:1–18

Studies in Revelation #21

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I've never looked through night vision binoculars and I'm assuming most of you have not either. But we've seen movies or even the news in which we get a glimpse of what it looks like to look through them. With our eyes we see one thing—mostly darkness—but with this technology we see what lies behind the darkness. Revelation 12–14 acts like a pair of night vision binoculars. As we look at the world we see dimly the people and institutions that make up our world. But now the Lord gives us a glimpse of clarity.

Chapter 12 showed us the reality behind Jesus' life and now our life as his church. Satan, described like a dragon, could not hinder the Son of God bringing salvation to the world so he turned his attention to the Son's mother, a symbol of the church. But she was given wings to fly into the wilderness. And there he pursued her and tried to drown her in a flood. But there the Lord opened the earth to protect her. So we read in verse 17 of chapter 12 that he continues to war against the sons and daughters of the church, you and I. And notice where the dragon was standing: "on the sand of the sea" (12:17). It's to that seashore that chapter 13 takes us, puts on our night vision binoculars, and shows us two more beasts besides the dragon—and note that this is an unholy Trinity:

1. ***The Sea Beast (vv. 1–8)***
2. ***The Earth Beast (vv. 11–17)***

The Sea Beast (vv. 1–8)

As we watch that dragon stand on the seashore we see with John a **beast rising out of the sea** (v. 1). We'll come back to the beast in a moment, but note where it comes from: the **sea**. This is where we need to pull up our Old Testament file on the screen of our minds. The **sea** is chaotic and so it becomes a symbol of the chaos of the world of the ungodly. For example, in Psalm 98 we read in parallelism, "Let the sea roar, and all that fills it; the world and those who dwell in it!" (Ps. 98:7) Now for extra credit you might remember this beast back in 11:7, where we read of the church symbolized as two witnesses and then of "the beast that rises from the bottomless pit [to] make war on them and conquer them and kill them."

Who is this **beast**? Remember, as chapter 12 described in visionary terms, King Jesus is now "absent" as he has ascended to heaven. So the dragon—Satan—causes a **beast** to come out of the **sea**—chaos of the nations to claim kingship over the earth. And so this beast is a mimic of the dragon. It is like a son that reflects his father. Notice that as father—dragon had seven heads and ten horns (12:3) so too his son—beast has **ten horns and seven heads, with ten diadems on its horns** (v. 1). Horns, heads, and diadems denote power and seven and ten denote fullness. This son has the fullness of his father's power as verse 2 says: **And to it the dragon gave his power and his throne and great authority.**

Who is this **beast**? Again, we need to open up our Old Testament app in our minds and we notice that the **beast** is the fourth beast of Daniel 7. As you turn there let me describe what you are reading. Daniel foresaw four successive kingdoms that would persecute the people of God. First, there would be the Babylonians symbolized like a lion with eagles' wings. Second, there would be the Medes and Persians symbolized like a bear. Third, there would be the Greeks symbolized like a leopard. And finally, there would be the Romans symbolized not like any mere animal but worse, having iron teeth and ten horns. The **beast** of Revelation 13 is one beast with *all* these qualities: **like a leopard...like a bear...like a lion** (v. 2).¹ This is why for early Christian's it was the Roman Empire, but also for successive periods of the church's history it's more than Rome. The **beast** is every kingdom of the world that persecutes the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ. We see this as the **beast** has authority for **forty-two months** (v. 5); which we've seen is symbolic of the entire time of the church until Christ returns.

Who is this **beast**? This son of the dragon is also a mimic of the Son of God. In chapter 5 John saw the lamb "as if slain" (5:6) and now he sees **one of** the beast's **heads that seemed to have a mortal wound** (v. 3), as the ESV poorly translates as. I say poorly because this is the same Greek word and tense as 5:6: "as if slain" (v. 3). And just as Jesus "came to life" (2:8) the beast's slain head **was healed, and the whole earth marveled as they followed the beast** (v. 3). Later in verse 14 the other beast proclaimed that this head "came to life." And so like the church

¹ Stott, 123.

worships Christ, we read that the whole earth **worshiped the dragon, for he had given his authority to the beast, and they worshiped the beast, saying, “Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?”** (v. 4)

The dragon is the Devil, but who or what is the beast from the sea? It is the dragon using earthly authority and power that leads **every tribe and people and language and nation...all who dwell on earth...everyone whose name has not been written...in the book of life** for the purpose of **mak[ing] war on the saints and to conquer them** (vv. 7, 8). “But doesn’t the Holy Spirit say civil government is a servant of God in Romans 13?” Yes, but note that in just the thirty–forty years between Paul’s statement and John’s vision, the Emperor and Empire that was benign towards Christianity had become a beast!²

The Earth Beast (vv. 11–17)

Now, go back to that imaginary seashore where we have our night vision binoculars on. As we’re looking at the dragon and seeing a beast rise out of the sea, we hear a commotion behind us. Children, if you’ve ever been camping out where it’s really dark at night, you know what it sounds like and feels like to be looking one way and then hearing something the opposite way. So turn with John and look. What do you see? **Then I saw another beast rising out of the earth. It**

² On this connection, see Kim Riddlebarger, “Men Worshiped the Dragon,” 5. Found at <http://kimriddlebarger.squarespace.com/downloadable-sermons-on-the-bo/> (Accessed March 1, 2015).

had two horns like a lamb and it spoke like a dragon (v. 11). What does it look like? A harmless lamb. But what does it sound like? A harmful dragon. While the first beast used overt power; this beast uses covert persuasion.³ And later in Revelation, this beast is called the “false prophet” (16:13; 19:20; 20:10). It looks like Christ, the lamb of God, with its two horns, but in reality it is anti-Christ (1 John 2:18, 22, 4:4; 2 John 7). For our brothers and sisters reading this in the first century, the first beast was the Roman Empire and this second beast was the worship of Empire and Emperor. Notice that in verse 12: **It exercises all the authority of the first beast in its presence, and makes the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast, whose mortal wound was healed.** What role does this beast have? It points the world to the first beast. So if the dragon is the father of the sea beast, his son, what role does the earth beast play in this unholy Trinity? He is like the Spirit.

And you see his works like the Spirit’s works in what follows: **It performs great signs, even making fire come down from heaven to earth in front of people** (v. 13). This false prophet does the same signs that God’s true prophet Elijah did. In other words, just as the priests of Pharaoh performed false signs mimicing Moses, so these do for the purpose of leading the world astray in idolatry: **and by the signs that it is allowed to work in the presence of the beast it deceives those who dwell on earth, telling them to make an image for the beast that was wounded by the sword and yet lived** (v. 14). And what of

³ See Johnson, 195.

those who would not bow their knees to Baal or Pharoah: **And it was allowed to give breath to the image of the beast, so that the image of the beast might even speak and might cause those who would not worship the image of the beast to be slain** (v. 15). There is no freedom of religion with Satan and his beasts: **Also it causes all, both small and great, both rich and poor, both free and slave, to be marked on the right hand or the forehead, so that no one can buy or sell unless he has the mark, that is, the name of the beast or the number of its name** (vv. 16–17). This **mark** signifies ownership. This mark is on the **forehead** and **right hand**, signifying complete ownership of thoughts and deeds.

What does this mean for us? Again, you need to put on your night vision binoculars to see behind what you only see dimly. As we look around the world and even to our own political power structure in Sacramento or Washington D.C. we see the false prophet working to get us to serve the beast and ultimately, whether they know it or not, to serve Satan, who stands behind them all. “I know, tell me about it. All those people fainting at the presence of then Senator Obama who have been led astray.” Let me be an equal opportunity offender and say that most of us are liable to fall into the same trap of putting your faith and trust in those with an “R” after their names? How many times do we need to hear, “This is the most important off-year election ever? This is the most critical Presidential election of all time? This is it; if we don’t win this one we’re finished as a country?”

Conclusion: The Spirit's Call to Us (vv. 9–10, 18)

Let me conclude with the Spirit's call to us in the world while we await the world to come. We are called to hear his voice this morning (v. 9). We are called to **the endurance and faith of the saints** (v. 10). We are called to be wise, understanding that all the things around us are the institutions of fallen man apart from God (v. 18).

While the world is under the sway of the unholy Trinity of dragon, sea beast, and earth beast, we are called to be faithful to the one true God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Be aware of the Devil's power through politics. Be aware of the Devil's subtleties through ideology, philosophy, and theology on social media, on the media of talk radio, and through every other means.